# Doodling

As I doodled on my desk blotter, Rosie Baldwin and I were chatting about a new lipstick I'd purchased. Before I had a chance to tell her where I'd found the season's most coveted color, a large object fluttered past the office window. Rosie looked at me through thick tinted glasses and raised her hand to her mouth. Her lower lip trembled. I pushed the heavy pre-war window up and peered down four stories to the sidewalk. The object, a body in a blue silk dress, lay between two parked cars on Madison Avenue. It was Margaret Calhoun from the advertising department on the ninth floor.

Rosie screamed and the other girls from the typing pool came running to our side of the office. Girls pushed and shoved each other to get to the window and then fell silent when they saw the heap that was Margaret, four floors down, and in the distance, sirens broke through the humid New York City heat that rose from the street below.

"Sheila, she's looking up at us," Rosie said, her lower lip still quivering.

Rosie was right, Margaret's eyes were open. They were like glass marbles, not a flicker of life. Her pale face was framed by a black flip hairdo, and a white headband. There was no horror etched on her face but rather a serenity that I didn't understand. I could see the beginnings of a pool of blood gathering at her feet in the gutter between a red Cadillac and a white Ford Falcon.

Looking down on this hideous scene, I felt nothing. I hadn't known Margaret well. It wasn't like it was Rosie or one of the other girls in my typing pool. Like the others in my office, I had thought of her as an elevator acquaintance. We were polite to one another, we'd talked about the new IBM Selectric typewriters that the company had bought all of the typists, and we'd

 

often asked each other how the holidays had been or if the other had had a nice weekend, but we didn't socialize outside of work. I felt towards her like you do when you meet somebody and there is no connection. To me, she was just another secretary of many who worked for New Hudson Insurance. She was fortunate though because she worked for Mr. Randall, the head of advertising and marketing, which meant she made more than the other girls in her department and had a semi-private office, which she shared with Violet Gray. They were the envy of the others on the ninth floor.

That day turned into a hectic one, police and firemen up and down stairwells, commandeering elevators, blocking doorways, and asking questions. A handsome young detective, Scott Warren, was assigned the case. He wore a clean, pressed trench coat, polished black shoes, and a navy suit. When he removed his gray fedora, I noticed his slicked-back hair was mirror-smooth. He struck me as the antithesis of the New York City cop, but then nothing made much sense that day.

He took statements from people in Margaret's department. Violet Gray and Louise Peyton, who sat just outside Margaret's and Violet's office, had seen nothing; Violet had been in the women's room, and Louise had been typing a report. Mr. Randall, Margaret's boss, and Mr. Perry, a junior executive, had been in a closed-door meeting and had only heard about Margaret's fall when they were interrupted by Violet.

The detective made his way down to my floor and interviewed Rosie and me. He told us that we were the only ones who'd seen Margaret fall.

"Can you believe nobody else saw her?" Rosie asked, her large eyes bugging out in surprise.

 

"Hardly," I said abruptly. I sharpened a pencil, frustrated that Rosie wanted me to talk about what had happened. Rosie looked at me. I looked down at my blotter and ignored her, hoping she'd leave me alone.

"Sheila," Rosie pleaded, but I refused to look up.

Why did she insist on talking about it, I wondered. Wasn't it enough that Margaret was dead? Why did Rosie feel the need to rehash the day's events? What was done was done, and I had no intention of talking about it. If I ignored her long enough, I hoped she'd stop talking about it. It was all I could do to stay in my seat and remain calm.

That evening I feverishly went about my routine at home. There was laundry to do, a bathroom to clean, and cooking. I couldn't tolerate a home that was dirty or in disarray—order needed to be restored—and I hadn't vacuumed for at least a day. Everything I owned had its place, even down to my favorite pink pencil, which I'd found at work but rarely used so that it would last as long as possible. It was a relief to find that pencil was still in the pencil cup on my desk.

I tried to push Margaret from my mind, but she came to me in short images, and Rosie's unbidden questions, too. I dusted and arranged the coffee table as a way of concentrating on something else, but later realized I'd forgotten to replace the fashion magazines I moved next to the sofa. When I set out my clothes for the next day I chose a blue dress with a cream and white paisley pattern. A sudden moment of sadness came at me when the blue dress reminded me of Margaret's dress and the memory of her, lying, twisted, in the gutter. I put the dress back in the closet and picked a drab, olive colored skirt and a white blouse. When I scrubbed my face of makeup before bed, another picture of Margaret's serene face came to me in the bathroom mirror

 

only to be replaced by my weary and troubled face. I pulled the covers up tight around my neck and tucked the blanket in around me, cocooned like and protected, but it was not use. I slept fitfully.

Several days later we were told that the police had found Margaret's palm prints on the window sill as well as scuff marks from her shoes, and her prints on the window handles and glass. This was clear evidence she'd jumped, they said. They'd gone through her purse and coat but found nothing that would indicate why she'd done it. The top of her desk and the drawers were clean and orderly; nothing was out of place. Her death was ruled a suicide.

Rosie was the only one who wanted to speak about it—the rest of us kept to ourselves. If we couldn't avoid the subject, we referred to it as the "accident"—it was as if Margaret had had a communicable disease we'd thought we would get if we spoke its name. None of us wanted to believe she'd jumped.

Violet eventually called Margaret's brother to let him know he could come and pick-up her purse and coat. He left her desk untouched; it was more than he could handle. When he left, I didn't look at him because I didn't want all of the others to see how ashamed for him I felt. We weren't invited to the funeral, if even there had been one; no announcement was found in any of the local papers. It was as if Margaret Calhoun had never existed.

A few days after Margaret's brother had collected her things, Pam Gilpen, Betsy, and I were in the kitchenette in our floor. Pam asked timidly, "I wonder why she jumped?"

Betsy, our receptionist, took a long drag off an unfiltered Pall Mall, pushed her overly dyed blond hair around her ears and said, "I thought we weren't talking about that?"

 

I ignored Betsy and instead doodled on a steno pad. I'd bought colored pencils at the local art store the week before. I doodled clothing; today it was a skirt and jacket. The jacket was cut-to-fit. I used a pink pencil to draw dots to emulate tweed fabric. I added light brown and light blue flecks to give it depth. The suit I drew had belonged to my mother and was one of a number of stock items I'd drawn over the years. The last time I'd seen it was when I was four. I'd often pretended when I was young that the skirt and jacket would fit me just as perfectly as they had fit her. I remembered hanging over the front seat of her 1950s Chevrolet Bel Air as we drove to see my father at his office in Philadelphia. My mother had told me, in her ever present monotone voice, to sit back before I got hurt. I'd always thought that pink suit went so nicely with the aqua color of the car.

Pam's question started me thinking though—why had Margaret jumped? I fidgeted when I thought of it. What was it about Margaret's life that was so unbearable, I wondered. What was it that she couldn't live with for just one more hour or for just one more day? The questions were like a roller coaster, peaking at the first hill, and then self propelled. In the days that followed, I conjured up a number of reasons why Margaret would want to end it all: perhaps she was a jilted lover or her family had died leaving her all alone in the world. But then I remembered her brother was still alive. None of these made sense. And my blotter filled slowly over those days with my doodling, multiple colors, some in pencil, and others in pen, beach scenes with palm trees, and the form fitting clothes like the ones my mother liked so much. I couldn't make sense of it.

Each time I doodled, I remembered when my mother had died, and how my father had not wanted to talk about her, much the same way as the girls and I in my typing pool hadn't

 

wanted to talk about Margaret. When I grew older, I'd just assumed that my father hadn't known how to tell his four year old daughter that her mother wouldn't be coming home again. It was my mother's sister, Silvia, who had told me that there had been an accident on the highway. Neither my mother nor the Chevy Bel Air had survived. Aunt Silvia had not cried and neither had I. I didn't remember a funeral either. She was there one moment and gone the next, like Margaret.

Life went on after my mother had died. My father, ill equipped to raise a daughter, remarried quickly. My step-mother, Judy, was nice enough but she too wasn't interested in talking about my mother. She arrived one day, showed me her wedding ring, and then took over the house. My Dad went back to work, and Aunt Sylvia started coming around less and less. Judy quickly cleared away all of my mother's pill containers from the medicine cabinet, and tossed her books, which Judy called "gloomy." She pitched her clothes, too. Within two months of her arrival, the living room curtains were never closed again, new living room furniture arrived, new wallpaper went up, and the house had been transformed into a sunnier, happier place. As my mother slowly faded from the house, so too did my memories of her.

In the days and weeks after Margret's death, I thought about all of these things when I watched the Ed Sullivan show, when I rode the bus up Madison Avenue, even when I went to bed. The gears in my mind went into overdrive, around and around. My thoughts were no longer just about Margaret, but about suicide. What made a person do it? What had the pavement looked like to Margaret as she drew closer? Why did she look so peaceful lying on the sidewalk? What had my mother thought just before the lights went out? I'd only known two people who'd died, and in both cases, there seemed to be no good reason. Margaret jumped, but why? A car accident

 

took my mother, but why? Aunt Sylvia had said it was because of ice on the highway but when I was older I thought that explanation always seemed odd for late April in Pennsylvania.

One afternoon, the ribbon ran out on my typewriter and I had kept on typing, unaware that what I had typed was illegible. My preoccupation with Margaret's and my mother's deaths continued to grow. The dark circles under my eyes were proof of the hours I'd spent turning the accident over in my mind. My apartment was a mess, I'd not cleaned the bathroom in a week, and I'd all but given up ironing.

In the ladies room one day, Betsy said, "You're just a typist, honey. There's nothing you can do about it." She was exasperated that I'd pushed her to tell me why she thought Margaret had ended it all.

"Don't get all worked up over it," Edith, another typist, said, as she blotted freshly applied lipstick on a handful of toilet paper. "It's like this: some people just can't go on, and their only option is to end it. Plain and simple." She went on blotting her lips.

I was sure there had to be a better reason. The other girls said Rosie and I had clearly swapped roles, Rosie was done talking about and I was just getting started.

"It was the way she looked," I said. "When I looked down and saw her face, it was as if she was happy. And her dress, too," I'd said.

"What about her dress, honey?" Betsy asked.

Edith nodded in agreement, what did the dress have to do with anything?

"It just seems like such a shame to ruin a nice dress if you're going to end it," I said.

I told them all that it reminded me of the day my mother had died. She was dressed so nicely, too, in a pink tweed suit and white cotton gloves. The same pink tweed suit I'd been

 

doodling over and over again. She was going to have lunch in Philadelphia with my father that day. The smell of her perfume came back to me in small, jerky chunks like a silent movie, a memory I'd lost for years, but I didn't share it with the girls. I kept it to myself, as if doing so would preserve something special, just for me.

I'd smelled that scent as I hugged her goodbye that last time, nestled safely against her neck. The soft scent of roses from her Joy perfume, an obscenely costly perfume at the time, was still on the collar of her jacket. She'd touched my nose with her gloved index finger, and Aunt Sylvia took my hand and we watched her drive away in her aqua colored Bel Air. The recollection of her perfume was unsettling, and a flicker of anxiety tingled at the bottom of my stomach. I could almost feel Aunt Sylvia's hand holding mine, her face firm and unsmiling.

"I think once you've decided to end it all," Betsy said, "there is a calmness that takes over. You're at peace, the agony or difficult part is over. The decision is made. , at least that's what the psychiatrist who lives across the hall from me says. Anyway, maybe she wanted to look her best. I know I would."

That sentiment felt right. And vaguely familiar.

Whereas a week before I hadn't wanted to talk about Margaret's suicide, now I felt an urge to know more about her. The anxiety and panic I felt when I thought of her jumping was eroding my once perfect determination to ignore it. Who was she? Who were her friends, and what did the folks in her department know about her?  I'd asked John Hannigan, the elevator operator, to introduce me to some of them. John was a short, grumpy old man. His uniform was ill fitted and he complained about everything. If he wasn't annoyed about the air conditioning in the building he griped about the scandalous height of women's skirts.

 

“What do you want with them on the top floor, Miss Sheila?”

“I want to talk to a few of them about Margaret Calhoun.”

“Better to leave it alone,” he said firmly.

I didn’t want to leave it alone and I told him so.

He crossed his arms and scowled. “Let sleeping dogs lie. There’s no sense is dredging up sadness we all want to forget.”

He eventually relented and introduced me to Violet. She was a slight woman, thin with protruding veins on her arms. She was also pretty, in a natural way. Like most of the girls at work, she used makeup, but sparingly. She was self-effacing and soft spoken. When we first met, I asked if she wanted to get some lunch. We talked about Margaret and she was guarded but as we spoke, a weariness in her face became palpable.

“It isn’t, after all, everyday somebody—” Violet left the “accident” unsaid.

“Did you feel like anything was wrong with her?” I asked over a bottle of Coke and a BLT at a drug store counter on Lexington.

I slipped my straw out of my bottle and twisted it around my right index finger. I twisted it hard till the end of my finger turned red.

“No, not at all,” she said. “She was just Margaret; never a problem, always at work on time.”

I unwound the straw and wound it around the tip of my finger again.

Then she added, “She’d been in a decent mood that day. She actually said ’good morning’ to me for the first time in weeks.”

 

Violet couldn't look at me. For that matter, I couldn't look at her either. I felt embarrassed, like I'd invaded Violet's feelings and Margret's too. I changed the subject to something less personal.

"Has a replacement been hired?"

"Not yet, and I haven't even cleared her desk out. I'm supposed to do it, Mr. Randall's orders, but I just can't bring myself to." Violet grimaced. She unwound the straw and wound it around another finger. "I hardly knew her but I liked her. She was never trouble." Violet's eyes watered up. "I feel guilty that I didn't try harder to be her friend. Maybe it would have made a difference."

I nodded and handed her a tissue. She took it and dabbed her eyes.

"I'd welcome any help with her desk, you know," Violet said.

When I was six, I'd gone through my mother's things that were stored in the attic. I'd touched her pink tweed suit that she'd worn the last time I'd seen her, and her white cotton gloves. He caught me when I'd found the matching hat and gently put it back. He wasn't happy, and from then on, my mother's things were off limits. The impression I had was that my father had carefully constructed a wall around my mother's life to keep her at arm's length—her things, her funeral, her death, they all felt as if they belonged to someone else.

"I was hoping somebody else would clear her desk out for me," Violet said.

"I don't know. Touching her things just feels—"

Violet cornered me. "It won't take long," she pleaded. "Maybe when I leave one evening I could call you, and you could just do it? Mr. Randall doesn't need to know. Would you do that for me?"

 

"Sure, Violet, I'll do it. Just let me know when the time is right." We finished our Cokes and went back to work.

Any sense of normalcy was gone. At home, I spent hours doodling at the kitchen table as I'd been doing in the office. A sketch pad I'd bought a few weeks prior was now dog eared with food stains on the cover. I didn't care if the pad was mucked up. My apartment was in shambles too. I'd never left as much as a dirty fork in the kitchen sink overnight; dirty plates and coffee cups seemed to have taken over the basin. And all I'd eaten for a week was scrambled eggs and toast. My will to cook, to do my laundry, and to clean had slipped away. My apartment looked like a flop house. Even a few of the girls at the office asked if my iron had broken because my once perfectly pressed skirts were now wrinkled and unkempt.

It was a week later that Violet called and asked if I'd clear out Margaret's desk. It was quick work. There was a single lipstick and a powder compact in the desk's center drawer along with a few sharpened pencils, a stenographer's notebook, and a stack of "While You Were Out" pads. There was no hand cream, no rouge, no mascara—unlike the rest of us, Margaret was obviously not much for makeup. I wondered what the girl was trying for in life. None of us wanted to be typists or secretaries for long. We were all on the prowl for eligible bachelors and the clothes, the shoes, the makeup, and anything else that helped was what we all wanted.

There was no personal address book with her friends' names or an agenda with her weekend activities. But I did find some smooth pale pink paper in the middle side drawer. It was expensive, high quality paper. I took it. Something about that paper reminded me of my mother but I wasn't sure why. As I thought about her, it occurred to me that I couldn't even remember my mother ever writing a letter much less owning a stack of writing paper.

 

That was how I came to have an envelope box of Margaret's things. Imagine a box that once had held five hundred envelopes now held Margaret Calhoun's few work possessions. The box felt insignificant but I kept it anyway, long past when I should have tossed it.

Clearing out Margaret's desk helped me to revisit the time I'd found my mother's things in the attic all those years ago. It felt good, it felt right, and it felt long overdue. But any preoccupation with Margaret's and my mother's deaths was gone.

Life went back to normal, and I went back to the typing pool.

Eight months passed before I looked in that envelope box again. I'd moved on to a new job at an advertising agency and a new apartment on the Upper East Side. Rosie, had left to work for a film production company, and Betsy had married Mr. Perry from the marketing and advertising department, and had settled on Long Island. Mr. Randall was still at New Hudson Insurance, as was Violet, but Mrs. Randall, who none of us had known was an alcoholic, had drunk herself into an early grave shortly after Margaret had died.

It was a hot summer evening when I arrived home to find a wedding invitation in the mail. Violet Gray and Eugene Randall were getting married. The invitation was printed on thick card stock with a pearl-colored, lined envelope. Reading it by the light of a nearby street lamp in the entryway of my building, I felt happy for Violet. She had got her man. And holding the invitation, I remembered the day that Margaret had died, and then the day that my mother had died.

I pulled Margaret's envelope box from the top back-most corner of my bedroom closet. I'd put it there in the hopes that I'd forget. And for a while I had. The box was the same but the lipstick had run over the top of the powder compact from the summer's heat.

 

I sharpened my favorite pencil and doodled on the pale pink paper I'd taken from Margaret's desk. I wondered what Margaret might doodle if she were alive. Nothing came to mind, a hint as to how little I knew about her. What might my mother have doodled, I wondered. A bird? Me? I drew her pink tweed skirt and jacket again, and the matching hat that my father had taken away from me in the attic. I drew her face under the hat for the first time in the years since I'd been drawing her clothes. My uncertain hand made it difficult to capture her tortured and unhappy demeanor but I didn't stop to clean up scraggly lines.

New images came through my hazy memories like her shaky hands, and the bottles that came down from the liquor cabinet shelves faster than they'd been replaced. Had I not been a four year old, I might have understood that drinking a bottle of scotch of day was a problem, but then my father took little interest in helping her. My eyes welled up when I relived her impaired speech and her inability to tie my shoes or help me dress each morning.

As I continued to draw my mother's face, I wondered, why hadn't the clothes that my she'd worn the day she died, the ones I'd found in the attic, been destroyed in the accident? The weight of this question was immense. Her life, her unhappiness, her troubles and her drinking, and my family's inability to deal with these, were all coming through my hazy awareness. She clearly couldn't handle it much the same as my father and Aunt Sylvia hadn't been able to deal with her death.

Sitting in my kitchen, I felt a certainty that those clothes had never been damaged in a car accident. I was also positive that her car, which I now was sure I'd seen numerous times on a used car sales lot in Doyletown after the accident, was my mother's car despite my father's claims to the contrary. I felt, unquestioningly, that nobody in the family had wanted to talk about

 

my mother's "accident" all those years ago because they were ashamed of her. There had been a funeral, even if I hadn't remembered it, and I knew that Betsy was right, that when you decided to commit suicide, a serenity replaced the pain and turmoil you felt. I knew this because I remembered when my mother drove away to have lunch in Philadelphia, she waved at Aunt Sylvia and me, and then she smiled. It was the only time I could recall that she'd ever smiled.